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FLORIDA-BASED NIHEI ‘HAPPY TO BE BACK’ AT CHURCHILL DOWNS FOR SATURDAY’S GRADE III, \$150,000 IROQUOIS STAKES

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (Friday, Sept. 14, 2018) – Florida-based trainer **Michelle Nihei** has not made a trip to Churchill Downs since the spring of 2013 but on Saturday, the former neuroscientist, hopes her journey to Kentucky will lead to a start in the Breeders’ Cup Juvenile (Grade I) with **Royal Urn** in the \$150,000 Iroquois Stakes – a “Win and You’re” in event for the Nov. 2 championship race.

“It was just two barns across the way when I was last here for the Breeders’ Cup with **Prince Will I Am**,” said Nihei, who is based in Barn 41 with Royal Urn. “I have some very fond memories here and I really hope to get back to the Breeders’ Cup with this horse.”

Owned by **Casa Farms I**, Royal Urn broke his maiden Aug. 24 at Gulfstream Park at first asking under jockey **Leonel Reyes**.

“Florida racing is tough over the summer,” Nihei said. “We’re holding our own and have some good horses down there. This was a logical spot to send this horse to try and get back to the Breeders’ Cup.

“It’s funny – this horse actually looks a lot like Prince Will I Am. They have very similar facial markings with spots on their forehead.”

Prince Will I Am raced at Churchill Downs five times throughout his 19-race career, most notably crossing the wire second in the Breeders’ Cup Marathon (GIII) in 2010 but was disqualified and placed 10th due to interference.

Unlike many trainers, Nihei did not grow up on the racetrack and was actually a neuroscientist prior to taking out her trainer’s license in 2007.

“I always rode horses as a kid and that had my interest growing up,” Nihei explained. “I grew up in a very academic family so I just always felt it was normal going through all of the schooling before starting my career. I was almost at a crossroads when I got out of school and was deciding if this was what I really wanted to do with my life.”

Nihei grew up in Calgary, Alberta, Canada and worked at Johns Hopkins University for nearly five years before she joined the **Todd Pletcher** stable in 2003 as an exercise rider.

“I sort of stuck my foot in the sport and ended up diving right in,” Nihei said. “I love it.”

The 1 1/16-mile Iroquois, one of four stakes events on the first Saturday of the 11-day September Meet, is the first scoring race on the 2018-19 “Road to the Kentucky Derby” – the series of 35 races that will ultimately determine the field for the 145th running of the Kentucky Derby Presented by Woodford Reserve (GI) on Saturday, May 4, 2019. Points awarded to the Top 4 Iroquois finishers will be 10-4-2-1 as part of the 19-race “Prep Season” that showcases foundation-building races in advance of the “Kentucky Derby Championship Series,” which begins in late February.

The complete Iroquois field from the rail out (with jockey, trainer, assigned weight and morning line odds): **Mr Wrench It** (Euclyn Prentice Jr., Coty Davidson, 120 pounds, 30-1); **Royal Urn** (Reyes, Nihei, 118, 12-1); **Drunk as a Skunk** (Joe Rocco Jr., Doug Anderson, 118, 30-1); **Tight Ten** (Ricardo Santana Jr., Steve Asmussen, 118, 2-1); **My Sixth Sense** (Shaun Bridgmohan, Mark Casse, 118, 10-1); **Tobacco Road** (Julien Leparoux, Asmussen, 120, 6-1); **Pole Setter** (Florent Geroux, Brad Cox, 118, 6-1); **Cairo Cat** (Brian Hernandez Jr., Kenny McPeck, 118, 8-1); **Manny Wah** (Channing Hill, Wayne Catalano, 118, 8-1); **Hog Creek Hustle** (Corey Lanerie, Vickie Foley, 118, 10-1); **Synthesis** (Drayden Van Dyke, Keith Desormeaux, 118, 12-1); and **Everfast** (Robby Albarado, Dale Romans, 118, 12-1).

The Iroquois is carded as Race 10 at 5:26 p.m. (all times Eastern) on an 11-race card that begins at 12:45 p.m.

Other stakes races on Saturday’s program are the 35th running of the \$100,000 Locust Grove (GIII) for fillies and mares at 1 1/16 miles and the 10th running of the \$100,000 Open Mind (Listed) for fillies and mares at six furlongs.

The four stakes, which are the last four races on the card, comprise an all-stakes late Pick 4 and are part of the late Pick 5 and Single 6 Jackpot sequence.

GELNER HOPES UNDEFEATED TAYLOR'S SPIRIT CAN NOTCH HER THIRD STAKES VICTORY IN SATURDAY'S POCAHONTAS WITHOUT HIM IN ATTENDANCE – Trainer **Scott Gelner** last saddled **Taylor's Spirit** just 12 days ago in the \$60,000 Happy Ticket at Louisiana Downs but the 51-year-old horseman will not be at Churchill Downs on Saturday to watch his undefeated filly compete in the \$200,000 Pocahontas (Grade II). Instead, he will renew his wedding vows with his wife, **Felicia**.

"I couldn't find a good stand in for me to renew my vows, so I guess I'd better be with my wife," Gelner joked. "It should be a great weekend and we're very excited."

Owned by **Norman Stables** and **Mark Norman**, Taylor's Spirit bested five rivals by 3 ¼ lengths in the one-mile Happy Ticket run over the turf course at Louisiana Downs. The bay filly previously won the Prairie Gold Lassie on dirt at Prairie Meadows by 3 ¾ lengths.

"The big question has been the quick turnaround from the Happy Ticket," Gelner said. "She's done everything right after the race and her blood count has been good. So, we're going to take a shot. She's a horse that has been so impressive in her early career and this is a logical next step forward. She's already proven herself on both surfaces but I think she's better on the dirt."

Taylor's Spirit, an \$80,000 purchase from the 2018 OBS April Sale, has been primarily based at Prairie Meadows in Iowa and Evangeline Downs in Louisiana but will now join Gelner's string of horses at Trackside Louisville – Churchill Downs' satellite training facility located five miles from the main track.

The Pocahontas will be the last of 11 races on the Saturday racing program and has a scheduled post time of 5:57 p.m. (all times Eastern).

The 1 1/16-mile race opens the "**Road to the Kentucky Oaks**" points system that will determine the field of 14 for America's premier race for 3-year-old fillies next spring. The Pocahontas offers Kentucky Oaks points on a scale of 10-4-2-1 to its top four finishers.

The Pocahontas also is a Breeders' Cup "**Win and You're In**" Challenge race for the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies, which will be run Friday, Nov. 2 at Churchill Downs. The Pocahontas winner will earn an automatic berth in the starting gate for the 1 1/16-mile race for 2-year-old fillies, along with \$60,000 in starting fees and a travel stipend.

The field for the Pocahontas, in order of post position (with jockey, trainer, assigned weight and morning line odds): **Serengeti Empress** (Corey Lanerie, Tom Amoss, 120 pounds, 5-2); **Love My Honey** (Julien Leparoux, Mike Maker, 118, 6-1); **My Wynter Rose** (Cory Orm, Tommy Short, 118, 50-1); **Profound Legacy** (Brian Hernandez Jr., Ian Wilkes, 118, 20-1); **Splashy Kisses** (Drayden Van Dyke, Doug O'Neill, 118, 4-1); **Lightscameraaction** (Robby Albarado, Kenny McPeck, 118, 20-1); **Include Edition** (James Graham, Vickie Foley, 118, 30-1); **Two Dozen Roses** (Ricardo Santana, Todd Pletcher, 118, 6-1); **It Justhitthe Wire** (Joe Rocco, Kiaran McLaughlin, 118, 6-1); Taylor's Spirit (Shaun Bridgmohan, Gelner, 120, 8-1); **Saved At Dawn** (Fernando De La Cruz, Brad Cox, 118, 15-1); and **Tapping Pearl** (Florent Geroux, Mark Casse, 118, 10-1).

CALHOUN OPTIMISTIC GRANDGRAN CAN SHOW EARLY PROMISE AS HIS DAM GRAN LIONESS – There are nine 2-year-old maiden races carded over the opening three days of the September Meet at Churchill Downs with many horses making their first-career starts. One of those horses, who hopes to win on debut as his dam **Gran Lioness** did in 2010, is **Wayne Sanders** and **Larry Hirsch's Grandgran** for trainer **Bret Calhoun**.

"We trained Grandgran's mom and she was very precocious for us," Calhoun said. "I sure hope this colt can follow in her footsteps because she could really run."

Gran Lioness, who trained three years under Calhoun's care, won two stakes races and was Grade III placed in the Rachel Alexandra (GIII).

"Gran Lioness was a really nice horse throughout her career but eventually had a couple of setbacks and we were forced to retire her," Calhoun said. "I was sort of torn whether to run Grandgran going six furlongs or one mile for his debut. I was hoping to get a two-turn, one-mile race for him to start at but this will do just fine."

Grandgran is entered in Race 6 Saturday, a one-turn, one-mile, maiden special weight contest with jockey **Gabriel Saez** aboard.

"It was actually around this time last year when I saw this horse go through the ring at the (Keeneland September Yearling) sale and we decided to buy him," Calhoun said.

The son of Super Saver was purchased for \$125,000 and has been training at Churchill Downs since late June.

Saturday's 11-race program has a first post of 12:45 p.m. (all times Eastern) and Race 6 has a post time of 3:16 p.m.

OPEN MIND, LOCUST GROVE KICK OFF OF SATURDAY'S ALL-STAKES PICK 4 – Saturday's 11-race program at Churchill Downs features an all-stakes 50-cent Pick 4 that will begin in Race 8 with the \$100,000 Open Mind and \$100,000 Locust Grove (Grade III).

The six-furlong Open Mind field is led by 7-5 morning-line favorite **Vertical Oak** for owners **Kirk and Judy Robison** and Hall of Fame trainer **Steve Asmussen**. The filly was most recently second in the Honorable Miss (GII) at Saratoga.

The Open Mind field from the rail out (with jockey, trainer, assigned weight and morning line odds): **Thirteen Songs** (Robby Albarado, Dallas Stewart, 120, 30-1); **P Boo** (Jack Gilligan, Kirk Harris, 120, 20-1); Vertical Oak (Ricardo Santana Jr., Asmussen, 120, 7-5); **Courtmeewithcarats** (Sammy Camacho Jr., Clarke Vesty, 120, 50-1); **Our Majesty** (Corey Lanerie, Ron Moquett, 120, 8-1); **Miss Kentucky** (Brian Hernandez Jr., Rusty Arnold II, 122, 2-1); **Astrollinthepark** (Gabriel Saez, Larry Jones, 120, 2-1).

In Race 9, **Merriebelle Stables'** Fleur de Lis Handicap (GII) winner **Blue Prize (ARG)** tops the 1 1/16-mile Locust Grove as the 2-1 morning line favorite for trainer **Ignacio Correas IV**.

The field from the rail out (with jockey, trainer, assigned weight and morning line odds): **Streamline** (Chris Landeros, Brian Williamson, 123 pounds, 15-1); **Champagne Problems** (Calvin Borel, Ian Wilkes, 121, 4-1); Blue Prize (ARG) (Julien Leparoux, Correas, 123, 2-1); **Dutch Parrot** (Joe Rocco Jr., Will VanMeter, 121, 20-1); **Pinch Hit** (Shaun Bridgmohan, Brad Cox, 121, 4-1); **Mannerly** (Corey Lanerie, Brendan Walsh, 121, 5-1); **Tiger Moth** (Florent Geroux, Cox, 123, 10-1); **Sailor's Valentine** (Brian Hernandez Jr., Eddie Kenneally, 121, 10-1); and **Pacific Pink** (Ricardo Santana Jr., Steve Asmussen, 121, 12-1).

The all-stakes Pick 4 will close with the \$150,000 Iroquois (GIII) (Race 10) and \$200,000 Pocahontas (GII) (Race 11).

Post time for Race 8 is 4:21 p.m. ET.

STAKES CLOSINGS – Nominations to the Sept. 29 \$200,000 Lukas Classic (GIII) for 3-year-olds and up at 1 1/8 miles, \$100,000 Ack Ack (GIII) for 3-year-olds and up at one mile, \$100,000 Jefferson Cup for 3-year-olds at 1 1/8 miles on the turf and \$100,000 President of the UAE Cup (GI) for Arabian-breds at 1 1/16 miles close Saturday. To nominate visit: <http://www.churchilldowns.com/horsemen/stakes/nomination-forms/>

'INSIDE CHURCHILL DOWNS' CONTINUES FRIDAYS AT 6 P.M. – **Inside Churchill Downs**” airs Friday at 6 p.m. on ESPN Louisville’s **ESPN 680/105.7**.

The weekly horse racing radio show is co-hosted by Churchill Downs Racetrack’s **Darren Rogers** and **Kevin Kerstein**, and delivers a wide-ranging list of interesting guests, from jockeys, trainers, owners to well-informed handicappers and other industry insiders. Those outside the Louisville radio market can listen live online at <http://www.espnloouisville.com>.

DOWN THE STRETCH – Jockey **Adam Beschizza** will serve a three-day suspension beginning Sunday after he was disqualified in the Kentucky Downs Juvenile Turf Sprint Stakes on Saturday due to interference in the stretch, according to trainer **Liz Morris**. ... Top sprinter **Mind Your Biscuits** trained for the first time at Churchill Downs on Friday morning for trainer **Chad Summers** as he began preparation for the Sept. 29 Lukas Classic (GIII) and Breeders’ Cup on Nov. 3. The colt is expected to gallop Saturday at 5:30 a.m., according to Summers. ... Those attending Saturday night’s NCAA football game between **UofL** and **WKU** at nearby Cardinal Stadium can get their party started early at Churchill Downs free of charge. Ticket-holders to the game will receive free admission to the track simply by showing their game tickets at Churchill Downs admission gates. ... The 2019 Kentucky Derby Winner’s Trophy will be on display in the Woodford Reserve Winner’s Circle for the Iroquois. ... An In Memoriam video tribute to **John Asher** will be shown on the Big Board immediately after the Locust Grove and prior to the Iroquois.

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